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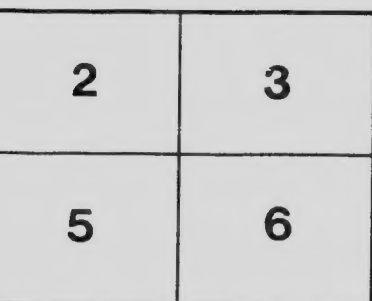
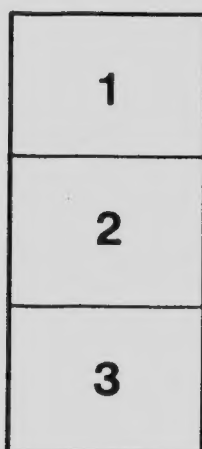
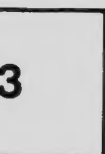
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THE PROPHET HABAKKUK:

A Study.

By D. A. STEELE.

"Upon my watchtower will I stand."

The prophecy may be divided into three sections:

I. BOLD QUESTIONING OF JEHOVAH AND HIS REPLY.
—Chap. I, chap 2:4.

The prophet lifts his voice to God in a hitherto unusual manner, questioning the Deity as to why He allows such great evils to go unrebuked. Other prophets commence by saying: "Hear, for Jehovah hath spoken;" "The word of Jehovah came to me;" while another uses that expressive phrase. "The hand of the Lord was upon me." This man begins in a bold upbraiding tone: "O Jehovah, how long shall I cry and Thou wilt not hear? Why, oh why, is all this violence permitted, and thou wilt not save?" In verses 5-11 without any indication of a speaker, as in our dramas, God sends him answer: The Chaldeans are coming! That will clear up matters. Then in verse 12-17, Habakkuk resumes his questioning: How long will Jehovah suffer a tyrant who sweeps up the peoples into his net like fish? He is diverted from the sins of his own people to this terrible monster who has been declared as coming in such a grand array.

II. A SERIES OF WOES UPON THE WRONG DOER. — Chap. 2; 6-19.

These "taunt songs" refer to the same parties concerning whom the prophet questions God in chapter 1:2-4, and are to my mind the wicked among the prophet's own countrymen.

III. THE MANIFESTATION OF GOD SETTLING ALL QUESTIONS. — Chap. 3.

This is one of those tremendous appearances of the Almighty for the reassurance of His servants, which only Hebrew poets are capable of describing. Compare Job chapters 38-41; and Psalms 18, 29, 68.

PART I.

These are the outlines in the rough; but when we come to particulars our hard work begins. None of these minor prophets are easy to interpret, and Habakkuk is no exception. The time is universally admitted to be somewhere along the line of Jeremiah's career, say B. C. 627-586.

I ought to say, that in the opinion of first-rate critics, the occasion of the prophet's questioning of God in verses 2-4 of chapter 1, seems to be that Israel is oppressed by a heathen power, either Assyria or Egypt, upon which the Chaldean shall bring the just judgment of God. I prefer, however, the view that the prophet is here speaking of wickedness among his own people. Upon this supposition, let us attempt, as well as we may, to explain the language and imagery here used.

First, then, note how the prophet estimates the weight resting upon the thoughtful saint. He uses the oppressive word,

THE BURDEN.

The man who surveys the sins of his people is bow-

ed down under the consideration. It is hard upon the flesh and spirit. How these Hebrew men bowed under the load! They, like good ministers now, sometimes would fain be rid of it. They liked it no more than Dante did, who, when he saw the sufferings of his countrymen in that awful pit

—“wept so sore, that pitying I
Fainted away as though my grief would kill,
And fell, as falls a dead man, heavily.”

—*Inferno, Canto v, 119.*

The burden—ah the burden—of the man who sees the world as it is, and must do what he can for it. “O that mine head were waters,” cries the most plaintive of them, “and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.” The broken law is a sickening thing to such men. We have here

THE QUESTIONING SAINT.

Habakkuk asks a question, which we may well ask, Why this good, all comprehensive, all-correcting law does not work? Why, in the face of all God’s truth and judgments, men go on with their frivolities, and licentiousness, and rapacities, and idolatries—now, with the Gospel of the Holy One in their mouths, continuing in the same line of evil with the ancient peoples? O what does it all mean? We pray, and God does not seem to notice—the sinners flourish and feather their nests. They are in the high places! “How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear.” This is the wail of a spiritual soul, who is not in the market, nor in the stock companies, nor in the rings of the politicians, who is not influenced by the societies of the day. It is this spiritual aloofness of the prophet that always character-

ize the true minister of Jehovah. He can not be of the world any more than his Master. He is one-side, looking on, meditating it all—sizing it all up. And yet, strange to say, these are the very men who are troubled, these are the spiritual sceptics. The facts of life bewilder a man who believes in God, all mighty, all just, all merciful. Such is briefly, the idea of verses 1-4.

THE NAME OF TERROR.

Having stated his questions, in the manner of the Hebrew writers, without explanatory words, or introducing phrase, Jehovah comes in to answer, (verse 5). "Look round among the heathen, look well, shudder and be shocked, for I am about to do a work in your days, which ye shall not believe when told. For lo! I am about to raise up the Kasdim, or Chaldeans."

Who are these? The Chaldeans, to begin with, were a few half savage tribes, south of Babylon. Rebels against the giant power of Assyria, in time they secured the lordship of all Babylonia, and before the end of the seventh century, B. C., the prophets use their name for Babylonia as a whole. Medes on the one side, and Chaldeans on the other, waged interminable war against the old lion of Assyria. The name is a name of terror, and every one would quake with fear at the announcement. Notice the vivid sketching of their army, and follow the highly poetical description of these devastating hordes (verses 6-11.) Is anything you have read more graphic? Note the clear outlines of the hosts of cavalry; they must have been a nation of horsemen. They leap long lengths, they are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; they fly like eagles to their prey.

Note, too, the characterization of these Chaldeans,—a "bitter and hasty nation"—Napoleon like, they

seize ruthlessly any and every place, without saying by your leave. They are a law unto themselves, (verse 7),—and they are all-sufficient for the rough work of war. They laugh at monarchs and kinglets, (verse 10). They smile at fortifications, and quickly heap up a bank of clay, and take them (verse 10b). But, as with so many conquering hordes, the wind shifts and they pass away. Doomed are those whose own strength is their god! After all, the army of the idolater is chaff before the wind. Now, this is simply magnificent. Try to describe some great event of war—a Waterloo or Trafalgar—and see how near you can attain to this masterly style. In English it is of the finest quality, but if we know each Hebrew word, it is superb.

THE REMONSTRANCE RESUMED.

After this announcement, in dramatic form, of the awful terror coming upon them, the prophet breaks forth afresh in the spirit of remonstrance with possesses him, vs. 7-12. In plaintive tone, he throws himself back on Jehovah, His eternity, His holiness, His great purpose. "Thou hast ordained him for judgment." Surely such a God will work deliverance. "We shall not die." But, like the few in the present age, the prophet sees the great prevailing truth of the Divine government. "Thou, O Rock, has established him for correction." These calamities which afflict His church have the end in view of chastisement and reformation.

Our prophet is so possessed of this spirit of remonstrance that again he breaks forth in verse 13, in boldest questioning. "How canst thou, the all-Good, permit such things?" So oppressed saints in every generation, down in their hearts, if not in written words, have framed the same inquiry, O why, Lord? How long? Jeremiah had much of this, chapter 12. 1. "Righteous art thou then O Jehovah, when I con-

tend with thee; yet would I reason the cause with Thee."

How many times have we felt that, and dared not utter it. Calvin's remark is helpful here: "When men are thus destroyed with impunity, and one oppresses almost all the rest, there seems indeed to be no divine providence." These men are the men not of Christian joy, but of Christian misery. Paul-like they are in anguish about something, or some people. "I could wish myself accused." "O wretched man." The stake in the flesh is pinning him down,—yet must not be removed. Such souls must be content with a word, an indication of the Divine finger. Go on, up the ladder, whether you see the next step or not. Such is the inner life of these peculiar God-gifted men. Observe what the prophet does with these torturing thoughts seething within him.

PART II.

We come to consider the second section, to observe the attitude of the man who is so sorely agitated—this man who dares to think for himself, and who places his perplexity before his God. He knows that God is Governor of all things. He lives, as seeing Him who is invisible. He has a resource known only to that small band who have been ordained for special work. He betakes him to

THE TOWER OF LONELY CONTEMPLATION.

Let us then with expectation take up chapter 2:1, and find another resource of the perplexed prophet. He goes not to books—not to teachers, short-sighted like himself; he must get away from mortals, only half wise at the best. Into the woods, out on the open sea, into the wilderness, and think it all over. "I will take my stand upon my watch tower; I will

listen for a Divine word; I will see if I can get any answer to my complaint." Surely I shall not be left in darkness, is the underlying thought. Such men always get answered. Let us go up to our high tower, watch and wait, and the answer will come.

Calvin's suggestion is worth something: "Some understand by the tower, the Word of God; and this may in some measure be allowed. If we more fully weigh the reason for the metaphor, we shall be at no loss to know that the tower is the recess of the mind, where we withdraw ourselves from the world."

. . . . "The prophet by tower means that he extricated himself from the thoughts of the flesh, for there would have been no end to his doubts had he tried to form a judgment according to his own understanding. . . . The prophet renounced the judgment of men, and broke through all those snares by which Satan entangles us, and prevents us to rise above the earth." (Comm. Minor Prophets.)

The man of God needs to get away from the world, ascend his tower of observation, and listen. Quickly, how delightfully soon, Jehovah answered his servant. Not, it is sure, at once making everything plain, but still putting him on the right track. (ver. 2.) A vision, which though it may seem slow in unfolding itself, will yet manifest itself in all good time—the "appointed time," observe. From his point of view, Geo. Adam Smith's remark is appropriate: "Obviously some series of historical events is meant, by which, in the course of time, the unjust oppressor of the nations will be overthrown, and the righteous vindicated"—or, if we follow the interpretation that the wicked among Israel are meant, it is equally applicable to them. Meantime, one of the great underlying principles of the kingdom of God is here affirmed, in an abrupt and obscure way. It is difficult to trace the connection between the verses that follow the Lord's answer to the prophet; but

somehow there is imbedded here an affirmation of the truth known since Abraham's time, which will be affirmed ever as the new day comes in,—never shall a day be so illuminated but this word shall be needed. Anyway it is now fundamental as ever. With some diffidence I ask the reader to follow me, as I try to give the meaning,—what seems to me the interpretation, after sore travail over it for many a long day. In the Vulgate, Jerome's Latin translation, I find a rendering which, if correct, helps us much. To my mind, it meets the requirements of the case. The verse "His soul is puffed up, it is not upright in him (I am making use of the revised version) but the just shall live by his faith," Jerome translates: "Behold, he who is unbelieving, not upright is his soul in him; but the just man shall live by his faith." "Incredulous" is the exact word of Jerome, but perhaps "unbelieving" will bring out the sense clearer to us English-speaking people. This points to what has just been said, and keeps up an antithesis,—the incredulous on the one hand, the believing man on the other. It is also in keeping with Hebrew poetry, which always maintains a balance between the two lines of the verse, the "parallelism" to which our attention has so often been called, and which we observe in the Psalms and poetical books of the Bible.

In other renderings, it is difficult to make sense, and I cannot but think that Jerome for whatever reason strikes the true idea. Probably he had a Hebrew manuscript differing from any we have at present. Paul quotes the passage with this verse and clinches his argument with it. I cannot help feeling that the Holy Spirit directed him so to use it in his Epistle to the Galatians, (3:10.11^b). The critics make a great piece of work over this passage; but there is no satisfaction, grammatical, theological or any other, obtained from their various attempts.

So I content myself with the above simplest and most satisfactory rendering. Smith (G. Adam) says that it is not 'faith' but 'faithfulness,' i. e., the just man is to live by his rectitude; which is puzzling to us brought up on Reformation pabulum, and does not bear out the apostle's application of the passage in Romans 1: 17 and Galatians 3:11. However, Dr. Smith, always reasonable makes an admission: "Of course, it has faith in God as its secret,—the verb from which it is derived is the regular Hebrew term to believe, but it is rather the temper which faith produces of endurance, steadfastness, integrity. Let the righteous, however baffled his faith be by experience, hold on in loyalty to God and duty, and he shall live." It is thus the critic compromises, and I am satisfied with this temper. I respectfully ask my brethren to give his explanation its due weight. Clearly now Dr. Smith goes on: "In spite of experience that baffles faith, the duty of Israel is patience in loyalty to God;" a sentence which is in keeping with the tenor of the prophecy.

THE FIVE WOES.

The careful reader of Habakkuk must have been puzzled over the abrupt transition from the eternal dogma, "The just shall live by his faith," to the statement, "Yea, moreover, wine is a treacherous dealer, a haughty man." What is the connection? It is difficult to find. The general sense of the clause (chapter 2:5) seems to look back to the tyrant described in chapter 1:13-17. Bearing in mind the great sin of Israel, with a side look at the oppressor of the nations, we come to the taunt-song of the five woes on the evil-doer. First, there is avarice coupled with violence: "Woe to him that increaseth his property by fraud; (2:6); woe to him that getteth an evil gain for his house, that he may set his nest on high," (verse 9). Note that in both

these woes there is included the penalty. In the first, the oppressed people shall turn and take vengeance, (verse 7). Have we not read the comment on this in history? May we not easily read it today? Tyranny defeats itself, 'it is an utterly useless way in which to deal with mankind. "By oppressing so many nations the tyrant is working out his own destruction,—as he treats them so shall they treat him." Compare Russia at this moment. Then go back, and remember Assyria and Rome, and Spain, with their greed and their butcheries. You may read here the epitaph of tyrannies for all time.

The second woe (verse 9) as well as the first, has also an individual interpretation. "Woe to him that getteth an evil gain to his house that he may live in grandeur." Are there not present commentaries in abundance? Those who are exploiting the public lands—those who are using trust funds—those who are swallowing up everything and everybody in gigantic corporations—those who are swindling the people by illegal contracts and rakeoffs—those who are debauching the electorate—woe to them, all of them! There is retribution written large. Even in the fine panneling, in the great beams, and on the wall of the house which has been raised by fraud, is the ancient hand-writing—yes, on every stone, a curse is inscribed. The prophet has one set of men in his mind, so he proceeds to pronounce the third woe on the cruel builder of a city. "Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood." It never has stood, never will, by a just and avenging law of Deity.

Yet in the midst of all the iniquitous doings of the wicked, there is a purpose of Jehovah. The nations will at last learn the sad lesson that evil doings end in vanity. And here suddenly bursts upon us the grand prospect which filled the vision of other prophets, that notwithstanding all the gig-

antic schemes of the wicked, "the kingdom of the world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ." (Compare Isa. 11:9. Rev. 11:15.) 11th verse: "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." This prophecy is quite unexpected in connection with the woes, and again we are at a loss to know how it is in keeping with what immediately precedes. But here it is—Habakkuk's one glimpse of the Messiah's day.

The fourth woe strikes at a different set of evil-doers. There is a side-light upon this passage in Orelli's Old Test. Prophecy. He is considering Obadiah's message, and translates verse 15, "For as you drank on my holy mountain, all nations shall drink perpetually, and drink and gulp, and become as if they were not." "As they have drunk there (on Zion) without limit, in gross indulgence disregarding the sanctity of the place, so in the same place they shall drink to excess until they lose their senses. This is a well-understood euphemism for the bloody end awaiting them." There is here in Habakkuk 2:15, in this woe to the drunkard-maker, a more general meaning than that appearing on the surface. Bear in mind the wide scope of the prophecy—it is looking to the peoples, as well as to the individual-nations are in the prophet's eye (see verses 10,13). But still he sees in the concrete—he selects the man that is working a great iniquity, and piles up the judgments of God on him. Let us follow him, with the individual transgressor before us:

Note in this case, as in all the others, the retributions: "Thou art filled with shame, drink thou also, until thou art utterly shameless." By the same evil with which you hurt others, you are punished. "The Lord's right hand shall be turned unto thee, and foul shame shall rest upon thy riches." Have we not seen the verification of these words? What

becomes of the wealth which rolls in from this iniquitous business? Where is the grandeur of the wine houses at the end of one generation? Have we not seen the children of the saloon covered with shame? Does it ever pay anything but disease, and dishonor, and death? The woe still stands, and all the horrid penalty will still be exacted. Does the recurrence of the refrain in verse 17, bear upon this sin—upon the general and individual participators, in the criminality? “Because of men’s blood.” (See verses 8 and 17.).

The last woe is pronounced upon the specific sin of the nations. With a pregnant questioning going before, we find the denunciation embedded in the midst of the paragraph (verse 19): “Woe to him that saith to the wooden block, awake: to the dumb stone arise!” What is the value of these beautiful expensive shams? “There is no breath at all in them—they are dead things.” One of the fine rebukes of idol-worship which are common to the prophets of Jehovah. Significantly the prophet adds to this remonstrance against idolatry, “But Jehovah is in his holy temple, be silent before Him all the earth.” Ever, these men lead us back to God Almighty—the finger of prophecy points the peoples of the world to Him who was and is and is to come.

PART III.

THE GRAND THEOPHANY.

We come to the third part of the Book of Habakkuk. The assurance with which the second chapter ends, viz: That notwithstanding the great power of Idolatry, Jehovah reigns, makes an ending, it is true, but the prophet is stirred again to another utterance—one of the sublime passages in Old Testament literature. Some have affirmed that the clos-

ing words of chap. 2 is the completion of the prophet's work, but this is pure speculation; we find no satisfaction in such a thought. Who can decide that an ancient author must have stopped at a certain point? and who shall debar him from launching out again? We will go on, then, the certainty on our side being a little better than theirs. The older versions Septuagint and Vulgate, include it.

This third section then (chapter 3) consists of one of the fine odes scattered over the Scriptures. (See Deuteronomy, chap. 33, Judges 5:4,5, Psalm 68.) If a comparison may be made, perhaps this exceeds in grandeur of expression.

The poet is calmly confident in Jehovah's righteous administration, and marches forward with firm tread—believing, adoring, exalting. While he trembles before the awful God of Israel, he knows that He will vivify his own cause; and his prayer is one that coincides with the Divine purpose. All comes out right to the man who sees in Divine light, notwithstanding the perplexities he has been laboring under. God Himself comes (present tense as margin), in power, whenever His kingdom needs Him. Remember his manifestations at crises in the history of the church—to Moses, to Elijah, to Isaiah, and to Peter, and Paul, and John. Remember the tongues of fire, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. All His servants now utter the same longing: "Come, Lord Jesus, come and take to thyself thy great power and reign."

We have all nature sympathizing with us here. The mountains, the seas, the tempests,—

"The deep uttered his voice.

And lifted up his hands on high."

The very sun and moon, are arrested in their course. Certainly, when Jehovah is riding out upon his chariots, when his spear is glittering, all crea-

tion stands amazed. The whole is bound together with man, and groaneth and travaileth for him; "waiting for the manifestation of the children of God."

What is all this grand display for?

"Thou art come for the salvation of thy people,
For the salvation of thine anointed."

is the answer. All the earth, and all the heaven is moved over a little band of worshippers of the living God, for such was the true Israel at the time of the prophet--may, it was all, for the moment, for one man, and after that for the ages coming on.

Before we pass on, note the impression made upon this Hebrew, by this revelation of God (verse 16.)

"I have heard, and my heart shakes;
At the sound my lips tremble,
Rottenness enters my bones,
My steps shake under me."

(Trans. G. A. Smith.)

This is just as it should be. When we stop to consider who God is, what His doings are, fear and trembling will seize any of us, and instead of voluble utterance, our lips will quiver. That is prayer, -better prayer than a fine recitation of old words. "Unto that man will I look."

RESIGNATION.

The man of faith, Habakkuk, is the man who is in complete subjection to his Lord. Though his prayer be not answered, in his way, though he cannot see the signs of dawn on the horizon, though the devastating horde must come, yet is he firmly planted on the Rock. The present manifestation has had its effect—it has greatly re-assured him; this marvellous Theophany has been as the wine of the kingdom to

him. He understands that the calamities of chapter 1 are not removed, they are inevitable. (Verse 16.) "I will quietly wait for the day of trouble. For the coming up of the people that invadeth us."

But see the manner in which he awaits the day of doom, and note the grand finale of unlimited confidence in Jehovah. This is a text for times of trouble, like the Psalmist's ode, "God is our refuge and strength." It is the fullest and noblest declaration of trust in God, no matter what may happen, only equalled by Job's shorter expression of the same thought:

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

Verse 19 is his signature to all. "Jehovah the Lord is my strength." The man who really has that confidence shall climb the heights.

We close our survey of this saint of the olden time by reverently reading his concluding texts:

"Though the fig tree do not blossom,
The labor of the olive fail,
And the field yield no meat;
The flock be shut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls;
Yet will I rejoice in Jehovah,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
Jehovah the Lord is my strength,
And he maketh my feet like hinds' feet,
And He makes me to walk on my high places."

This surely is faith in its highest exercise--trusting in the God who permits the famine, and exulting in Him with joy unspeakable when there is blank nothing to live on. Has any Christian ever exceeded this? Can we attain unto it? It is ours to desire, ours to endeavor after.

This attempt to interpret the prophecy is not altogether satisfactory. Occasionally the writer has

realized the obscurity of certain passages. But it is the best he can do with his present knowledge. It must be borne in mind that this is only a study, not a clear explanation of all its parts. With all its difficulties it is left to the consideration of the reader.

This study of Habakkuk was presented to the Cumberland Quarterly Conference, and again to the Minister's Institute at Liverpool in August last, and at the request of the latter body it takes this present form.

Amherst, N. S., October, 1906.

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